

32 feared killed as soldiers, gang clash in Rivers

ONCE again, the streets of Port Harcourt, Rivers State capital, turned a theatre of war yesterday. Guns boomed and the shrill cries of wounded persons sent chills down the bones of residents, many of whom were trapped indoors.

The gun duel was, however, not between two rival gangs, but between a combined team of the Army, and the Air Force on the one hand, and a suspected gang of militants on the other.

The state government, in a press statement last night, put the casualty figure at 32, including the leaders of the militia group, Soboma George.

*From Kelvin Ebiri,
Port Harcourt*

But the Movement for the Emancipation of the Nigeria Delta (MEND), in another press statement, claimed that George was still alive and that its members rescued the gang's leader from police detention.

The troops, named Joint Military Task Force (JTF), carried out the attack in a bid to root out the gangs that had since last week held the state capital hostage in their street gun duels.

Yesterday's attack on George's group is expected to be extended to the rival gang, Ateke

Tom's, according to military sources.

The fresh fighting erupted following reports that George had been killed by the JTF.

The recent upsurge in violence, in which about 40 persons have been killed, was said to have been triggered off by the attack and subsequent razing down of a hotel where George was suspected to be taking refuge.

The JTF cordoned areas surrounding the Rivers State Government House, which the militants had made attempts to attack. Residents around the area were said

Continued on Page 2

Death toll in

NEWS

Soldiers raid militants' hideout in Port Harcourt

Continued from Page 1

to be packing out to other parts of the city in droves.

Major Sagir, JTF's spokesman, disclosed to *The Guardian* that some suspected militants came out to the streets and started shooting around the Marine base area

which is the suspected abode of George, who the JTF commander, Brig.-Gen. Samuel Salihu, had accused of triggering off the recent insecurity in the state.

According to Sagir: "Due to last week's mayhem which was attributed to inter-cult crisis between Ateke Tom and Soboma George's groups, we moved in to restore law and order. And as we were doing that, we were gathering intelligence report as to the hideout of the militants."

He continued: "We were lucky we got the hideout of Soboma George and we went to attack it and cordon it. In the process there was exchange of fire between the militants and the Joint Task Force troops."

The Guardian learnt that when security operatives arrived at the hotel where George was staying at about 3.00 a.m., they interrogated the owner who denied that the wanted warlord was residing there. As the inquiry was going on,

some gunmen were alleged to have opened fire on the security operatives.

The security agents retaliated and in the process, the hotel located at the Makoba area of Port Harcourt, was razed down.

A JTF source disclosed that three persons were killed during the attack at Iyala Hotel, while Sagir confirmed that over 20 suspected militants had been arrested in the ongoing raid in Port Harcourt.

The report of George's death was said to have triggered off shootings around the city. Residents told *The Guardian* that persons suspected to be his allies went on rampage shooting guns and detonating dynamites.

An eyewitness in the Amadi-Ama axis of the city said two persons were struck by stray bullets, which killed them instantly. Sporadic shootings were reported around the Eastern By-pass, Trans-Amadi, Rumubiakani, Lagos Bus stop, Creek Road and Bonny Street. Thousands of people started packing out of Marine Base yesterday

afternoon while many more were trapped indoors.

JTF sources told *The Guardian* that a gunship also attacked three boats conveying some suspected militants to Port Harcourt. Over 30 occupants of the boats were killed in the attack close to Abuja Estate along Creek Road. Rivers State Commissioner of Police, Phelix Ogbaudu, described the attack as a JTF operation.

He said: "We got two boats. They had disembarked before we got them. There was shooting that lasted for sometime, it lasted for about five hours or thereabout. The security situation is okay, calm now and we are properly in full control and we are not resting on our oars as they might come back because of what happened today."

The JTF spokesperson said over 20 suspected militants were arrested during yesterday's raid, which was on as at press time. He said that the JTF would not relent in its raid on the hideouts of the suspected gang members until the state is

rid of them.

But MEND's spokesperson, Gbomo Jomo, said George was rescued from police detention and was hale and hearty.

He accused the military of not behaving better than the gangs they were claiming to hunt for. According to him: "If the military is not kept in check, we will be forced to get involved more visibly."

Sources disclosed to *The Guardian* that the JTF had been deployed to Okirika, the abode of the leader of the Niger Delta Vigilante, Ateke Tom.

Ateke Tom and leaders of six other groups that recently signed a peace agreement, namely: Outlaws, Niger Delta Solidarity Front, Klans Men, Green Landers, Black Axe, and Icelanders in Okrika have denied involvement in the on going bloodbath in Port Harcourt.

The soldiers were reported to have used rockets and machine guns in dawn raids on criminal hide-outs after six days of street battles between rival gangs last

week. The gangs responded by invading five districts across the city, including the area around the state government headquarters.

"The military suffered several fatalities after the initial encounter and have resorted to the use of choppers and gun boats," said a private security source quoted yesterday by the *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*.

Sagir Musa, spokesman for the task force, said the troops killed some suspected "bad boys" and arrested others, but declined to give figures.

A resident of the old district of Borokiri said he heard intense automatic gunfire all morning.

"A group of men drove past my house waving guns and blood-stained knives while a helicopter gunship hovered overhead shooting," he was quoted as saying.

"Before nightfall, the gunmen retreated back into the creeks around the city, which is home to Royal Dutch Shell among other big energy companies."

The state government described the military action as successful and that peace would soon return to Rivers: "The military operations that were carried out by combined force of the Army and the Air force successfully dislodged the cultists, who prefer to call themselves militants. The operations were decidedly a success and the cultists suffered heavily in men and materials," the government said.

It disclosed that the decision to carry out the operation was informed by the need to carry the war to the cultists and their den, adding that the desired result was achieved, to say the least.

Yar'Adua may declare emergency in energy sector

Continued from Page 1

a modern economy." He added that due to "leading efforts" of Vice President Goodluck Jonathan "to get the militants' leaders to come to the table for dialogue, we are on the threshold of having an understanding. We have adopted the Niger Delta Master Plan drawn up by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NNDC). We have agreed collectively with the states of the region, that as soon as peace is restored in the region, we will begin

full implementation of the holistic development."

The President also expressed regret that the education sector is in shambles, declaring: "You cannot develop a modern nation without a vibrant educational sector. I noticed that these days and in the last few years, when we require experts, we look forward to the Diaspora. This is another indication of the failure of the education sector. We know that the education sector is in serious crisis. Determination, hard work and a

lot of funding need to be invested in this sector. And to achieve the desired change, it is not going to be a one or two-day solution. But we must start. If we don't, there is no way we can grow the human infrastructure needed to power the commanding heights of the economy."

He bemoaned the level of dishonesty among Nigerians. For him, "there is outright dishonesty. When those in position of leadership are dishonest, it translates to the larger society. We must respect the laws govern-

ing our conduct. Institutions like the ICPC, EFCC and the Code of Conduct are put in place to tame corruption. Unfortunately, for every case that is detected (by these agencies), there are five or six that are undetected. We must find a way to ensure that each and every one of us fights a small battle and try to provide the right leadership".

The President therefore charged the participants at the retreat to recognise the fact that "we must

Continued on Page 4

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